Extract: Lady Macbeth’s ‘Unsex me here’ soliloquy (Act 1 scene 5)

Question: Starting with this speech, explain how far you think Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman.

Response:

Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth as a construct to explore the effects of power in the hands of women and to present power as a dangerous and destructive force when combined with ambition outside of the parameters of the established ‘natural order’ or accepted Chain of Being.

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as a powerful woman right from her first appearance in the play. She is given a soliloquy which reveals to the audience that she is determined to make herself as powerful as possible in order to support her husband in gaining the throne. The repetition of the imperative verb “Come” reflects her determination to grasp power by any means necessary – she summons “spirits” to her “woman’s breasts” to make her more masculine, to take her “milk for gall”. The idea that she wishes to remove her femininity and replace it with “gall” would be shocking to a Jacobean audience, who viewed women as mothers and caregivers and as people who should be guided by their husbands. The noun “gall” implies she wishes her female qualities to be made poisonous, which would give her the strength and power of a man. This also contrasts her statement about Macbeth in her previous soliloquy, where she expressed concerns that he was “too full o’th’milk of human kindness” to commit the regicide she is planning to increase their power. By attributing “milk” to him and turning hers to “gall”, Shakespeare is showing that she is attempting to reverse their genders – this shows that she is powerful at the start but, over the course of the play, this power diminishes as she has contravened the Chain of Being by summoning such masculine power and so Shakespeare shows that she is punished for this – “the queen, my lord, is dead”. She dies an off-stage death at her own hand, indicating how little power she has by the end of the play. Shakespeare also shows how she is powerful through her willingness to exploit her gender when necessary – she deflects attention from Macbeth as Duncan’s body is discovered and he over-reacts with a faint – “Help me hence, ho!” This pretended weakness is actually a sign of her power as she is manipulating the men around her.

Shakespeare has deliberately chosen to show Lady Macbeth summoning “spirits” and “murdering ministers” to “unsex” her in order to show his contemporary audience that she is going against God – calling supernatural “spirits” would have been shocking to a Christian audience – in order to gain this power and so the audience would expect to see this power used in evil ways and to see it lead to her downfall. Furthermore, showing Lady Macbeth summoning “spirits” is an indication that Shakespeare is linking Lady Macbeth to the supernatural characters of the play, the powerful but evil witches. Aligning Lady Macbeth with witches would have horrified James I, the monarch who was Shakespeare’s patron and who was famously obsessed with destroying witchcraft, and would have signified that Lady Macbeth’s power would be malignant and destructive to the other characters – she is described in the final scene as a “fiend-like queen”, with the adjective “fiend-like” signifying her connections to the devil.

Shakespeare also shows Lady Macbeth disguising her power with “thick night”, “smoke of hell”, “the blanket of the dark”. Using this semantic field of darkness shows that she has been corrupted by power. The concept of hiding evil deeds with darkness so “heaven” cannot “peep through”, or God cannot see, also becomes a motif Shakespeare uses throughout the play, the idea of deception. Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to metaphorically “look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under’t”. This would be shocking to an audience who have just witnessed the Gunpowder Plot as the attempted treason is fresh in their memories and the idea of grasping power in this way would be shocking. The noun “serpent” also has Biblical connotations of devils and the Garden of Eden and reminds the audience that power corrupts women.

Shakespeare presents Lady Macbeth as possessing power through her matriarchal relationship with Macbeth. Her continual questioning of Macbeth’s masculinity, “Art thou afeared”, “Are you a man?” and her use of negative adjectives “green” and “pale” to taunt him show how she is disputing his status as a powerful warrior and attempting to provoke a reaction. His change from “we shall proceed no further in this business” to asking his wife “if we should fail” effectively shows how she has assumed control of the situation and manipulated Macbeth into following her plan – she has, as she intended, metaphorically “pour[ed her] spirits into [his] ear”.

Shakespeare shows how Lady Macbeth is a powerful woman through her ability to retain control of her emotions/sanity for longer than Macbeth, as evidenced through her taking control in the banquet scene. As Macbeth responds to his visions of Banquo’s ghost, she mocks him with exclamatives “O, proper stuff!”, “Shame itself!” The noun “shame” reveals her disgust at Macbeth’s perceived weakness and shows her power as she attempts to manipulate him.

Shakespeare shows that power in the hands of women is destructive as Lady Macbeth eventually succumbs to remorse and guilt, despite her please to “murdering ministers” before any of the murders, through the scene where the Doctor observes her sleepwalking. She is shown to be hallucinating blood on her hands, “Out, damn spot! Out I say!”, with this metaphorical blood a symbol of her guilt and remorse. This scene reveals the change in her from her initial reaction to seeing the literal blood on Macbeth’s hands and ordering him to “go get some water and wash this filthy witness from your hand” - initially, she was powerful enough to be pragmatic and conceal their crimes, but as more blood has been spilled over the course of the play, Shakespeare shows that her subconscious cannot accept what she has caused and so her power is drained by her inability to sleep well; sleep was considered in Jacobean times to be healing and therefore only innocent people could sleep well. Lady Macbeth’s disturbed sleep echoes Macbeth’s concerns that “Macbeth does murder sleep” with the murder of Duncan and mirrors his “terrible dreams” earlier in the play. The use of monosyllabic, exclamative sentences in “Out, damn spot! Out I say!” is a departure from the lengthier soliloquies, often structured using iambic pentameter, Shakespeare crafted for Lady Macbeth, and this change in how her language has been constructed is representative of her mental breakdown and increasing powerlessness. Her final line in the play “What’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed” shows her acceptance of her responsibility and lack of power to change her situation and leaves the audience unsurprised when we learn of her death.